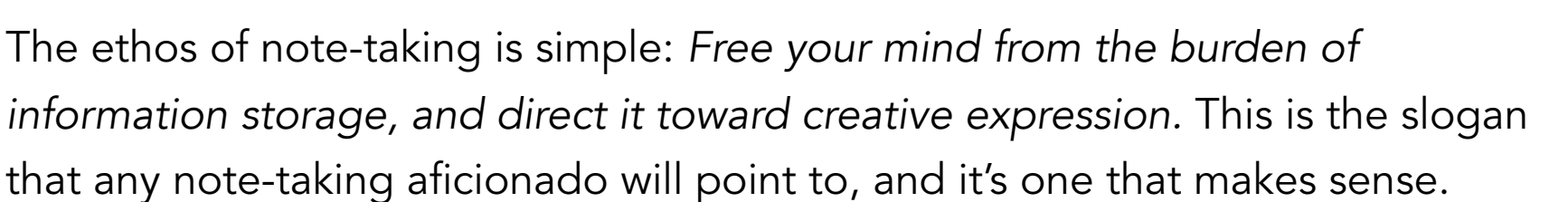




By Lawrence Yeo



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Philosophy

At its core, philosophy is about asking why we do the things we do, and to examine what's going on underneath the hood. So using this lens, the question I ask here is: *Why exactly do we take notes?*

The unsurprising answer is that we want to remember things we may otherwise forget. That memory is **woefully unreliable**, and even the most important of things could elude its ethereal grasp.

But fundamentally, note-taking is our attempt to transition the present moment to an imagined, future self. Whenever you take a note, you are giving yourself permission to let go of a piece of information so it could one day be accessible in the future. In other words, **you're trading the present moment for future utility.**

I'm reminded of this dynamic whenever I'm hanging out with my daughter and she does something super adorable. On one hand, I'm simply ecstatic to be a part of the moment. On the other, I feel compelled to take out my phone and record it so I can revisit the moment over and over again.

If I do indeed take out my phone, a paradox emerges. Yes, I'll have an artifact that I can continuously revisit, but the poignancy of the present moment diminishes. I'm no longer experiencing the moment with my fullest attention; rather, my focus is on how well I'm capturing it for my future self.

This sentiment can also be imported into the domain of knowledge.

If I'm reading something great, I'm immersed in the idea or narrative that is being communicated. I feel like I'm there alongside the author, completely present with the words on the page.

But let's say I come across a sentence or two that I want to save for later. When I make the motion to highlight it, I break myself out of the present and pivot my mind to the future. I think about how this can be *useful*, and how I can incorporate it into the goals and priorities I've set for myself. This is very subtle, but that's what's happening.

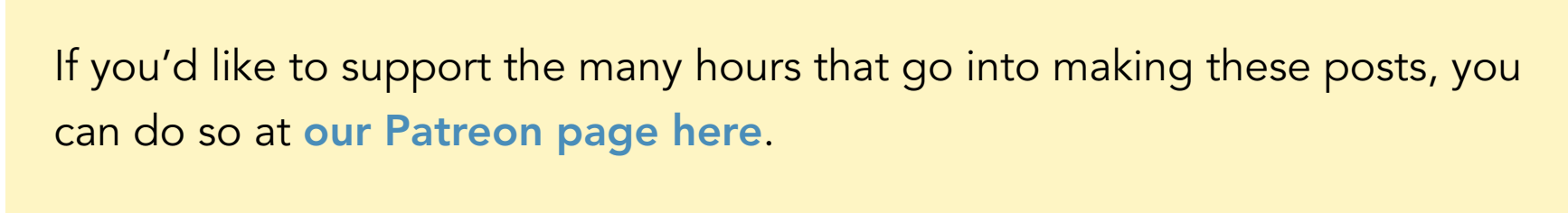
In the same way that recording the present moment diminishes presence, capturing a flow of information diminishes resonance. A person with thousands of notes views information primarily for its utility, and not for how it moved them when they first came across it.

The reason why I read so much fiction is because I'm completely present when I read it – the temptation to highlight things is essentially zero. I'm reading just to be immersed in the experience, similar to how when you're watching a movie, you don't have a notepad out cataloging things you've learned along the way. There's nothing obviously useful in a utilitarian sense when I read fiction, which isn't the case when I read philosophy or other works of non-fiction.

And for the most part the things that resonate most don't require a note to act as a reminder in the first place. While our memory isn't the best "capture device," it does do a good job retaining the things that truly resonated with you. A joyous experience with your loved ones, a great conversation you had with a friend, a book that shifted the way you think. You don't need to catalog the minutiae of these things to remember how great of an impact they had.

With that said, I recognize the importance of note-taking as well. Unsurprisingly, do it too. But at the same time, I don't rely on my notes to remind me of what I want to write about or reflect on. My mind is already fine-tuned to be aware of the things that pique my curiosity, and my intuition is what cultivates my sense of style.

Creative expression shouldn't be contingent upon a hoarding of information. We shouldn't lionize someone that relies on a database of 50,000 notes to get their creative juices flowing. Rather, it's the person that can draw upon a unique blend of personal experiences, unfiltered memories, and imaginative thinking that will create a lasting work of art.



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